

RECENT TRENDS IN RATES OF SEXUAL ACTIVITY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Charles F. Westoff
Office of Population Research
Princeton University

Introduction

Interest in rates of sexual activity has focused on teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and especially in recent years on HIV-AIDS. Some programs advocating abstinence have emerged and a growing awareness and concern about the spread of the infection have prompted an interest in the prospects of a reduction in the rate of sexual activity in different segments of the population. In this paper, we review recent trends in these rates with special emphasis on southern and East Africa which have the highest prevalence of HIV-AIDS. The data are from countries in the Demographic and Health Surveys program that have conducted repeat surveys over the past decade.

The selection of countries examined in detail here depended on the availability of a recent survey and an earlier survey for trend analyses. Preference is given to countries with significant levels of HIV-AIDS, focusing on southern and East Africa. Unfortunately, the new South African survey conducted in 2003 is not yet available and the 2005/06 survey in Zimbabwe is ongoing; both of these countries have a high prevalence of the disease.

Measures

Several measures of sexual activity are employed here. The main reliance is on the proportion of women who report having had sex in the four weeks preceding the interview. Another measure is age at first sex (Gage, 1995; Blanc and Rutenberg, 1990). The reports of women are the principal focus but for a few countries with available data the experience of men is also included.

Background

This study emerged from an analysis of the apparent stall in contraceptive prevalence in Kenya between 1998 and 2003. It was determined, however, that if a denominator of sexually active women is substituted for all women, an expected increase in contraceptive prevalence appears. This led to a finding that the rate of recent sexual activity had declined in Kenya.

At first glance, a similar decline seems to be occurring in most other countries in the region of Africa where HIV-AIDS is most prevalent. In contrast, little change and even increases in recent sexual activity are evident in West Africa (see Figure 1). The proportion of women in 10 southern and East African countries who reported having had sex in the preceding four weeks has, for the most part, declined. In 10 countries of West Africa, on the other hand, only in Senegal does recent sexual activity show any sign of declining, with 6 out of 10 countries showing an increase.

The main objective of the present analysis is to examine the trends in southern and East Africa in greater detail to determine how these changes are distributed among different segments of the population.

Trends by Age

Trends in recent sexual activity are shown for each current age group in Table 1. With several exceptions, the recent declines are evident at most ages.

Marital Status

One question that arises is whether the downward trend of recent sexual activity is confined to changes in behavior among the never-married population which would be consistent with the postponement of first sex described below. The generalization from the data in Figure 2 is that the decline is evident for ever-married women. In all 10 countries recent sexual activity has declined for currently and formerly married women. A more detailed assessment of the effect of marital status and age has been undertaken for Kenya and for Zambia which shows that a decline has clearly occurred among the never-married and the formerly married women with slight declines evident among the currently married. These trends are evident at each age.

Age at First Sex

Another relevant observation is the trend in the age at first sex (Figure 3) which is related to schooling. The measure used is the proportion of women 20-49 who first had sex by age 18. Although several countries show little recent change, the dominant pattern is a decline in this proportion, indicating later ages at sexual debut (Mensch, et. al. 2004; Westoff, 2003, Zaba et.al., 2004).

Urban-Rural Residence

With the exception of the urban populations of Malawi and Mozambique, the decline in the recency of sexual activity though frequently slight is evident in all 10 countries in both urban and rural areas (Figure 4).

Education

In most but not all of the 10 countries, there is a negative association between level of education and the recency of sex. Combined with the fact that education is increasing over time, it is important to analyze trends within educational levels (Figure 5). The largest declines in sexual activity are mostly evident among women with no education while in the Secondary + category, half of the countries actually show increases.

Men

In about half of the countries included in this study, there are available sample surveys of men. These are small samples, however, with higher sampling errors than in the larger samples

of women. In four of the first five countries in Figure 6 from southern and East Africa, recent sexual activity shows a decline especially among never-married men. In half of the six countries in West Africa, there is also evidence of a decline but in the other three there is little signs of change.

Husbands Away from Home

One possible explanation of declining sexual activity could be a possible increase in the proportion of women whose husbands are away from home, perhaps because of increases in labor migration. The evidence for this, however, is negative; most, but not all of the countries actually show a decrease or no change in this proportion. Namibia is the one exception in southern and eastern Africa with the proportion of husbands away from home increasing from 14 percent in 1992 to 21 percent in 2000 but among women whose husbands were at home at both times, the proportion with recent sexual activity declined. A similar pattern is evident in West Africa with Cameroon the only exception where the proportion of husbands living away had increased between 1998 (15 percent) and 2004 (22 percent). And, in this country, the proportion with recent sex increased among women with husbands at home in both years.

Polygyny

Another possible explanation for changes in recent sexual activity over time could be changes in the proportion of women in polygynous unions. From the woman's perspective, the presence of another wife in the household would presumably mean less sex with her husband than if she were the only wife, a difference that is evident empirically. In southern and eastern Africa, the proportion in polygynous marriages is comparatively low, averaging 10 percent and showing little change across surveys. In West Africa, the average is 38 percent in the most recent surveys having declined from 41 percent in the earlier surveys. There is no support for the proposition that trends in polygyny explain the decline in sexual activity in southern and eastern Africa though in a few West African countries that have experienced declines in polygyny – Benin, Burkina Faso and Cameroon - there has been some increase in sexual activity.

Conclusions

We are left with a largely unexplained difference between the two regions of Africa: in eastern and southern Africa, recent sexual activity seems to have declined while in West Africa the general picture is either no change or an increase in such activity. It could of course simply be a statistical fluke. The most plausible explanation is that the region with the declines is the high HIV-AIDS belt with the reduction of sexual activity being one response to the risk of infection. This likely hypothesis is not so easy to confirm however. As would be expected, women in southern and eastern Africa are clearly more exposed to the risk of the disease than those in western African countries. For example, in the ten countries in the east and south that are included in this analysis, an average of 64 percent of the women know someone who has the disease or who has died from it, compared with 35 percent in the ten countries in West Africa. This is certainly consistent with the HIV-AIDS hypothesis but hardly conclusive and, there is other inconsistent evidence. Although there has been a decline in the proportion of unmarried men with one or more sexual partners in the last 12 months in Kenya from 60 percent in 1998 to

45 percent in 2003, and in Zambia from 61 percent in 1996 to 55 percent in 2002, a similar picture also appears in countries in West Africa. For example, recent declines are also apparent in Cameroon, in Burkina Faso, and in Ghana.

It is also evident that abstinence is increasingly cited by women as a way of avoiding HIV-AIDS but this response has increased in both regions of Africa though the level is higher in southern and eastern Africa.

Concerns about HIV-AIDS would seem to be diffusing throughout sub-Saharan Africa with the southern and eastern countries clearly in the forefront. Although it may be impossible to prove definitively that this is the explanation for the regional differences in trends in recent sexual activity, it certainly remains the most likely hypothesis.

Two countries with high HIV-AIDS prevalence – Zimbabwe and South Africa – have had recent DHS surveys that are not yet available, countries that will be of particular interest for this inquiry.

References

Blanc, A.K. and Rutenberg, N. 1990. "Assessment of the quality of data on age at first sexual intercourse, age at first marriage and age at first birth in the Demographic and Health Surveys" in Institute of Resource Development/Macro Systems Inc. *An Assessment of DHS-1 Data Quality*, pp. 41-79

Gage, A.J. 1995. *An Assessment of the Quality of Data on Age at First Union, First Birth and First Sexual Intercourse for Phase II of the Demographic and Health Surveys Program*. Occasional Papers, No.4, Calverton, Md: Macro International.

Mensch, B.S., Grant, M. J. and Blanc, A.K. 2005. "The changing context of sexual initiation in sub-Saharan Africa" paper presented at the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population meeting in Tours, France, July, 2005.

Westoff, C. F. 2003. "Trends in marriage and early childbearing in developing countries" in ORC Macro, Calverton, Md., *DHS Comparative Reports*, 5.

Zaba, B., Pisani, E., Slaymaker, E. and Ties Boerma, 2004. "Age at first sex: Understanding recent trends in African demographic surveys", *Sexually Transmitted Infections*, 80 (Supplement II): 28-35.

Figure 1: Recent trends in the percent of women who had sex in the last 4 weeks

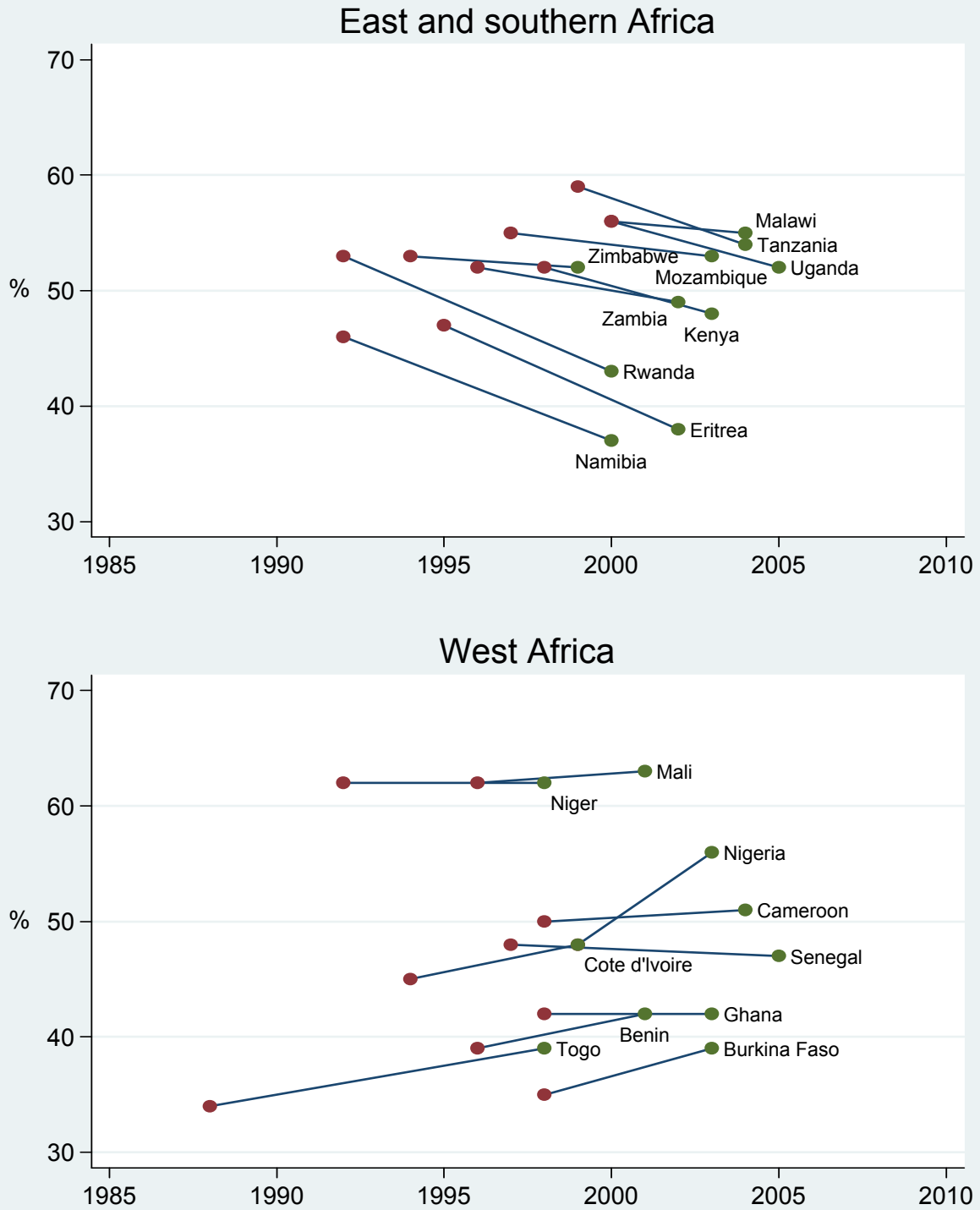
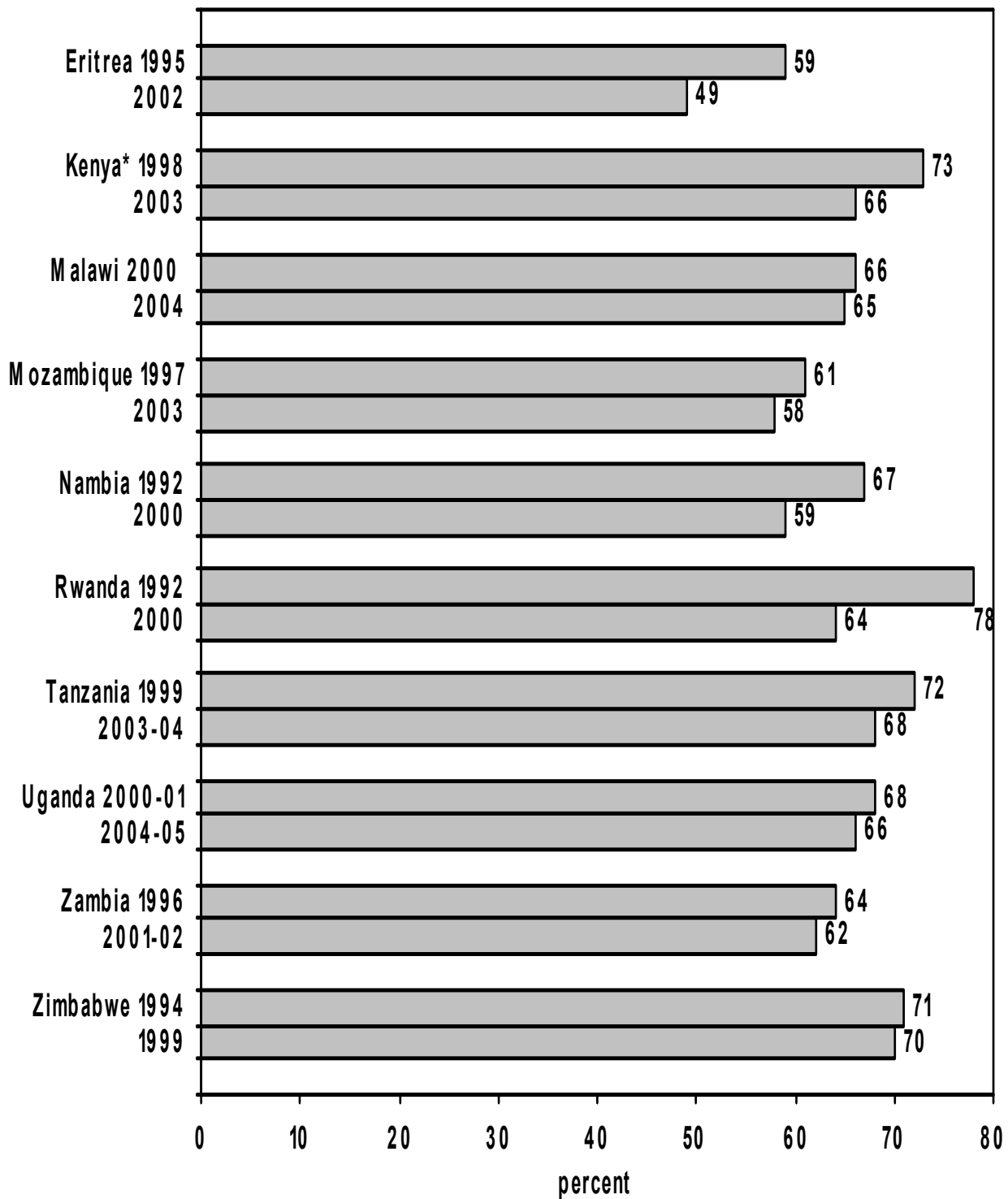


Table 1. Recent trends by age in the proportion of women who had sex in the past four weeks.

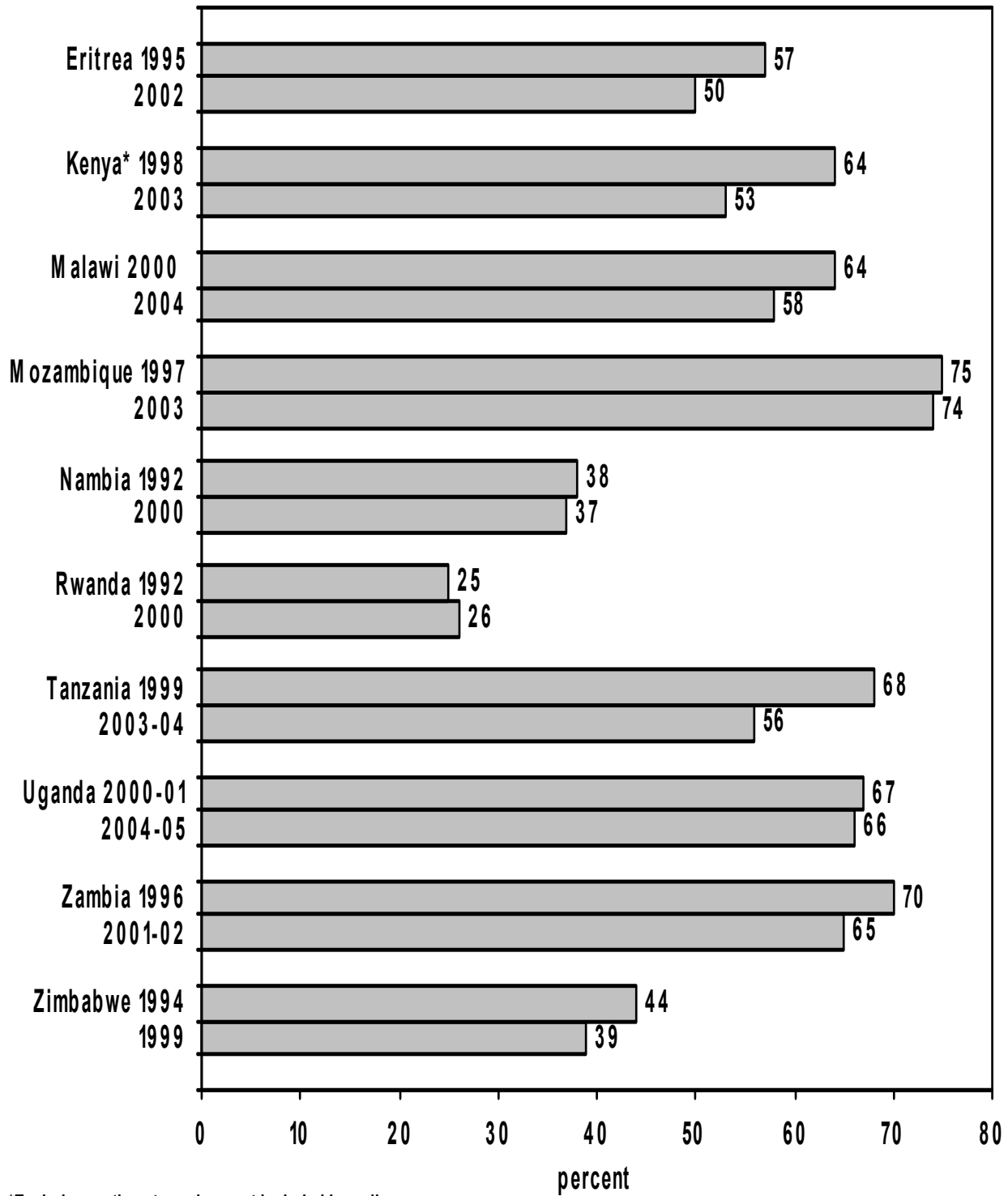
		<u>15 - 21</u>	<u>20 - 24</u>	<u>25 - 29</u>	<u>30 - 34</u>	<u>35 - 39</u>	<u>40 - 44</u>	<u>45 - 49</u>
Eritrea	1995	17	45	56	60	64	60	56
	2000	12	28	40	49	54	61	57
Kenya	1998	19	52	67	67	66	62	54
	2003	17	47	64	63	62	59	50
Malawi	2000	28	58	67	64	67	65	62
	2004	28	60	66	65	60	64	56
Mozambique	1997	36	57	56	64	69	63	55
	2003	39	52	55	60	61	64	56
Namibia	1992	21	43	53	62	62	56	56
	2000	14	32	41	48	52	49	47
Rwanda	1992	9	48	74	76	73	68	62
	2000	7	46	65	62	57	50	44
Tanzania	1999	29	65	68	69	71	72	69
	2003	25	56	65	67	66	62	56
Uganda	2000	30	66	65	65	64	62	52
	2004-05	20	59	69	64	63	59	47
Zambia	1996	27	54	62	65	63	62	61
	2001	24	51	60	62	58	59	51
Zimbabwe	1994	16	54	71	70	68	69	63
	1999	19	53	67	70	66	67	59

Figure 2. Recent trends in the percentage of ever-married women who report having had sex in the past four weeks.



*Excludes northeast province not included in earlier surveys.

Figure 3. Recent trends in the proportion of women 20 – 49 who report first sex by age 18.



*Excludes northeast province not included in earlier surveys.

Figure 4. Recent trends in the proportion of women who had sex in the past four weeks, by urban – rural residence.

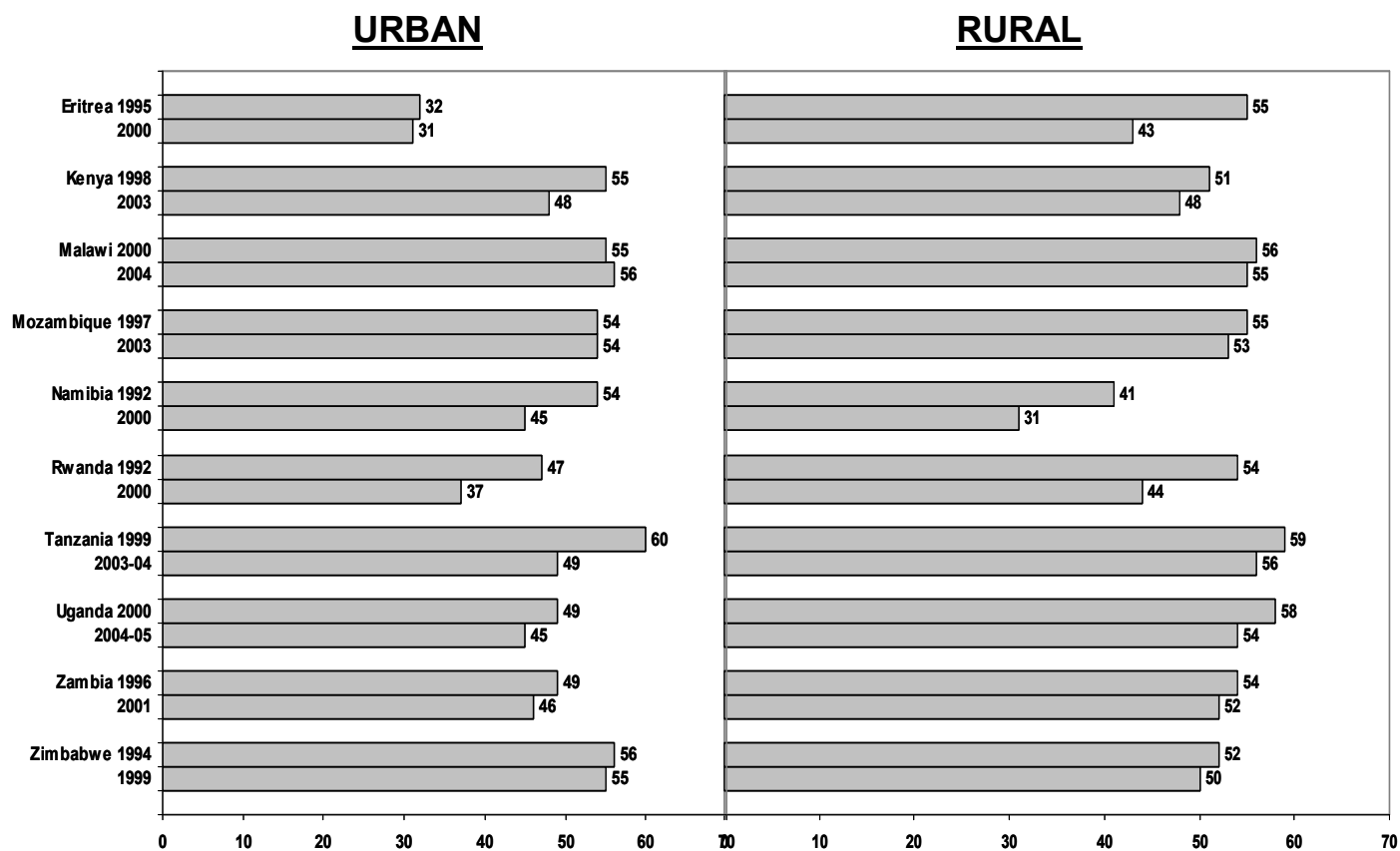


Figure 5. Trends in recent sexual activity by education.

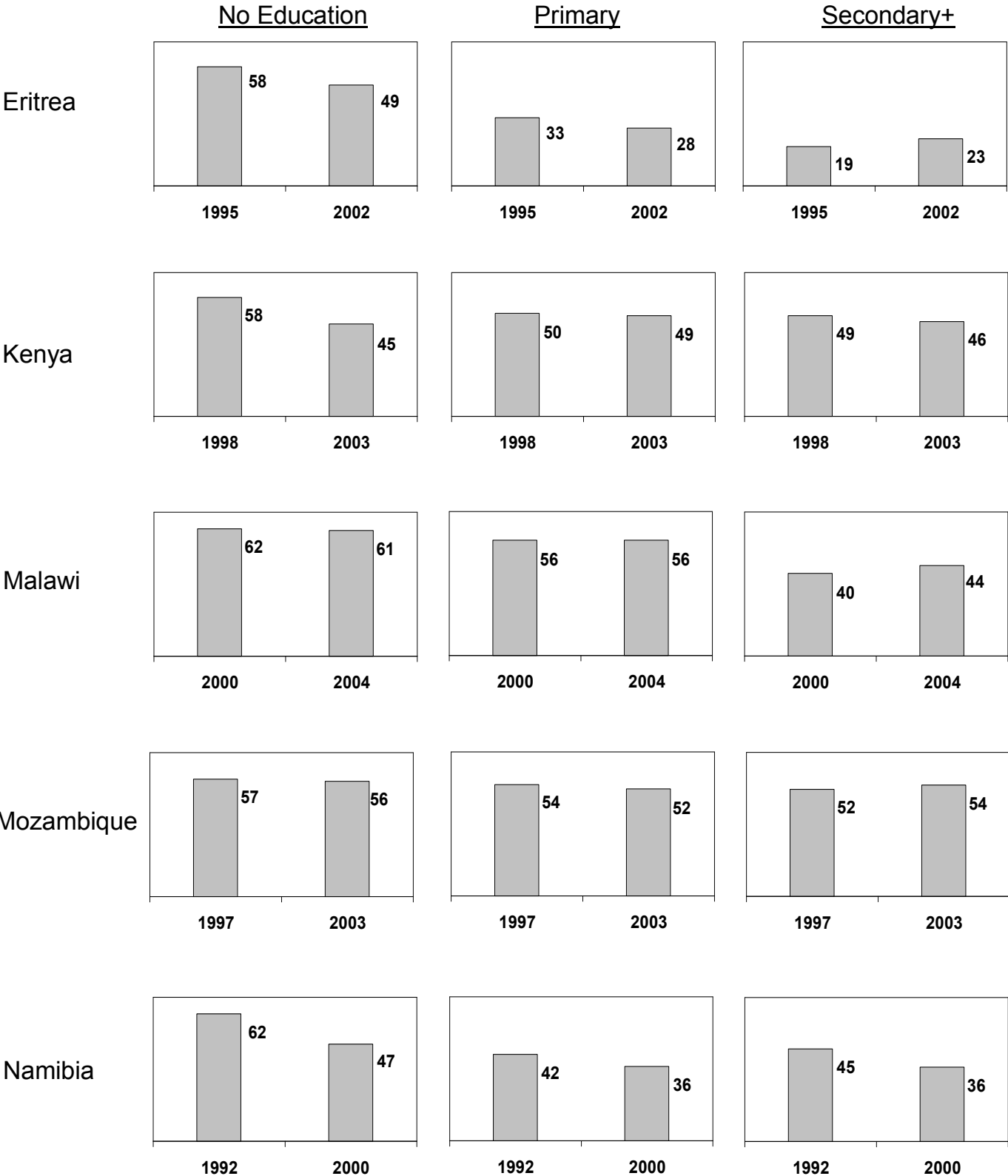


Figure 5 continued.

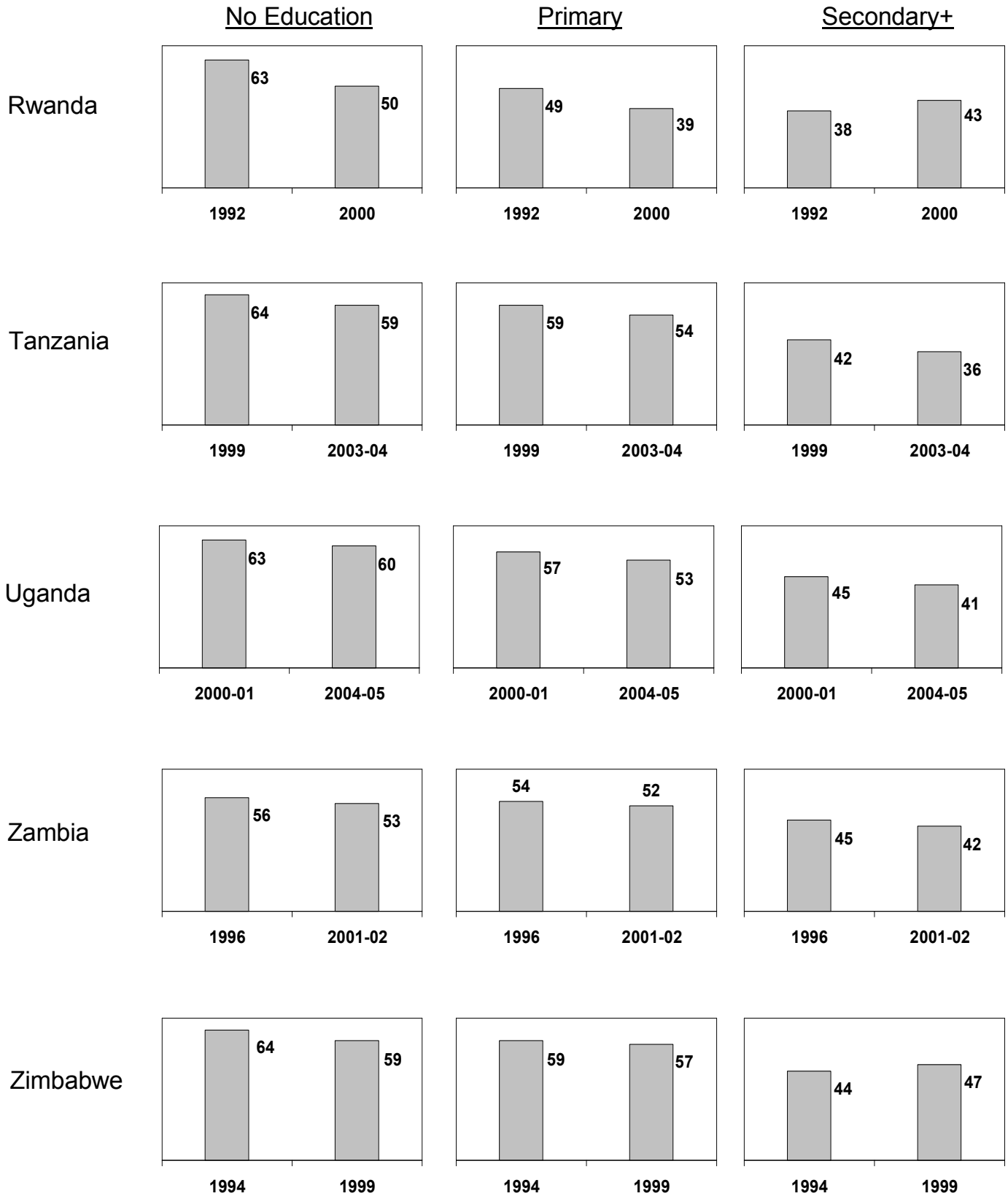


Figure 6. Trends in recent sexual activity among men.

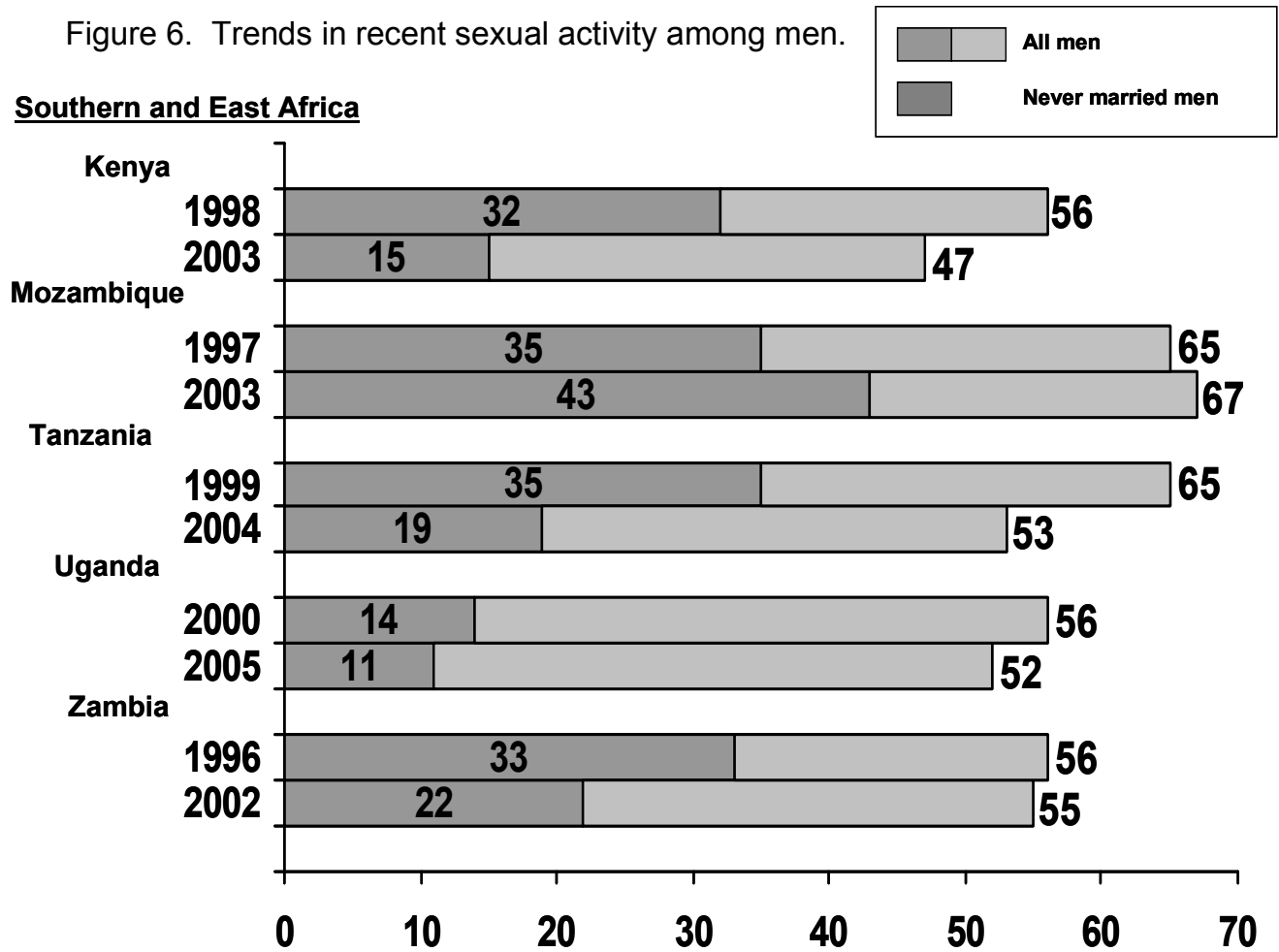


Figure 6, continued.

